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Experiencing Violence in a Cross-Media Environment: An Interdisciplinary Focus Group Study

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Abstract

Due to drastic changes in the contemporary media environment, criminology needs to examine how the experience of violence is shaped by the emerging cross-media context. We conducted a qualitative focus group study ($N = 24$) to explore conversations about mediated violence experiences and crime media literacy in Finland, which manifests as an advanced state of cross-media transformation. We found that the cross-media context affects how information on violence and crime is received, as people combine and contrast bits of information from traditional media, social media, alternative media, and direct personal and local knowledge. This constellation of information sources is a fertile ground for distrust, as people challenge the self-regulatory limits of 'old media' in reporting on crime and construe such limits as 'downplaying' violence. Consistent with the general 'media-critical' frame of mind, the interviewees saw crime news media as fear inducing. Through a focus group of older participants (in addition to three groups of younger participants), we observed generational differences that reflect the dimension of change from the old monolithic media environment to the cross-media context. The new context blurs the distinction between media content and social network-based reception and is thus a gamechanger for media criminology.

Keywords: crime journalism, cross-media, fear of crime, media literacy

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The impact of media on people's experiences of violence and crime has been a topic of continuous academic and popular discussion. Research has indicated that media influences can impact behaviour by triggering violence epidemics (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015) and more isolated incidents of violence (Vives-Cases, Torrubiano-Domínguez, & Álvarez-Dardet, 2009). Other studies have found that exposure to crime news and fear of crime are correlated (Callanan & Rosenberg, 2015; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006). However, some studies have questioned this correlation (e.g. Dalquist, 1998) and it is true that the possible effects of media violence upon aggressive behaviour and fear of crime are contextual and depend upon other factors. Research on social media use and fear of crime is still scarce, and what research exists has yielded different results in varying populations and depending on how social media is used; nevertheless, a connection is likely to exist (Intravia, Wolff, Paez, & Gibbs, 2017; Kohm, Waid-Lindberg, Weinrath, O'Connor, & Dobbs, 2012). There is also reason to believe that media coverage can be linked to people's opinions about crime policy and to crime policy formation (Estrada, 1999; Pollack, 2001).

Much of the aforementioned research is quantitative and therefore cannot examine in detail how media is used and how crime information is distilled from a constant flux of information. As previously suggested by Boda and Szabo (2011), qualitative research is needed in this area. Furthermore, the existing Nordic research, while important (Estrada, 1999; Pollack, 2001, Smolej, 2011), largely predates the more recent drastic explosion of social media and transformative communication technologies. The same is true for Theodore Sasson's classic *Crime Talk* (1995) that used qualitative methods to identify the interpretative issue frames of the American crime debate.

Rather than studying causal effects, in this article we study the ways in which ordinary media consumers receive, evaluate, and criticise information about crime and violence in the contemporary media environment. In doing so, we seek to more explicitly combine discussions from media research and criminology. We focus especially on cross-media reception (Schrøder, 2011) of crime information and (crime) media literacy (e.g. Potter, 2014) in the social construction of the experience of violence.

We base our discussion on the study of four focus group interviews in which we examined how people construct their perceptions of violence and crime and how this is connected to their use of media and other information sources. We highlight the cross-media aspect (Schrøder, 2011), which means that this study takes into account the multiple media that people use for different context-specific purposes. We investigate what makes different sources of crime-related information worthwhile (Schrøder & Larsen, 2010) or relevant (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015) for people and then assess how these relate to people's notions and experiences of violence. With regard to crime media literacy, we refer to audiences' abilities to interpret and question crime related information they obtain from different sources.

Our analysis stems from a collaboration between criminologists and media researchers.¹ From this interdisciplinary base, we address the criminologically central topic of how the experience of violence is embedded in the complexity of the contemporary media environment. As a country manifesting an advanced state of cross-media transformation, Finland is a suitable context for studying this connection (Eurostat, 2017). The public's trust in news is also exceptionally high in Finland (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018).

We begin the article by characterizing the recent developments in the media landscape and highlighting the cross-media, media literacy, and media effects aspects that underlie our analysis and motivate the research questions. We also present our empirical data and methods.

We then report on our empirical findings in three sections. First, we explore how the interviewees value and use different sources of crime-related information. Second, we report on media criticisms and discuss their crime media literacy. Third, we present findings on how the interviewees reflect on how the information they obtain affects their perceptions of violence and crime. We conclude by summarizing our findings, discussing their limitations, and identifying further research needs.

Cross-Media, Media Literacy and Issues Relating to Media Effects

Our everyday reality is inseparably linked to the media, even when we communicate with each other (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 33). We obtain many of our topics of speech from the media, and we negotiate our perceptions of the world based largely on what we have learned from the media. The Internet has increased the range of information sources and people now have more media content to choose from, in accordance with both their interests and independent of place and time, which has fragmented the personal media landscape (Tammi, 2016, p. 138). The individual's personal preferences and motivations have thus become more important. Moreover, media users' social networks have increased their influence with regard to what is important, interesting, and informative (Webster, 2014, p. 13). These processes may result in changes in the relationship between news media use and fear of crime.

Three assumptions guide our analysis of crime-related media use. First, from the cross-media point of view, we assume that the reception of crime news is based on the worthwhileness of different media. By identifying the different media repertoires (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017, p. 367) that people have and assessing the position and function of each medium in these repertoires (Lomborg & Mortensen, 2017, p. 349), it is possible to study not only what media people use but

also how and for what purposes some media are combined (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017, p. 365). To become incorporated into an individual's media repertoire, a medium must be experienced as subjectively relevant and worthwhile. People refer to media content in discussions with friends and family members, and they share and discuss media content in different social media arenas, which makes the media an integral part of people's social networks (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015). How people close to an individual media user value a particular news medium may also be significant for that individual. These social aspects contribute to the worthwhileness of different media (Schrøder & Larsen, 2010, p. 528). Our first research question is:

RQ1: What kind of cross-mediated mechanisms underlie crime-related media use?

Our second assumption suggests that media literacy skills contribute to people's relationship to information about violence and crime. People have differing abilities to understand how messages are produced and how reliable they might be; this affects how people negotiate their impressions of violence and threats. People often trust their own ability to distinguish which information is true and which is distorted, whereas their belief in others' ability to do so is not so strong. Media literacy has many aspects, and it is reasonable to assume that how people master these aspects varies greatly. Presumably, in this regard there are at least generational differences (Cardoso, 2006).

According to Potter (2014, p. 39), media-literate persons are better able to 1) filter messages that are not useful to them, 2) connect new messages to previous information, 3) interpret information from several perspectives and synthesise them, 4) identify different levels of meaning in a given message, and 5) make use of the information they encounter. Buckingham (2006, pp. 267–268) connected media literacy more explicitly to the digital media environment

and highlighted the ability to address questions about authority, reliability, and bias, and also to broader questions about whose voices are heard and whose viewpoints are represented. He also stressed the importance of acknowledging how sites are designed and structured and mentioned the need to be aware of the influence of advertising and other means of persuasion. In the case of information about crime and violence, all of these aspects of media literacy are important mediating factors when people construct their perceptions about violence and crime based on different media and other sources.

Assessing the reliability and credibility of sources can be difficult with online media. According to Andrejevic (2013, p. 3), the multiplicity of different sources can engender doubt and mistrust. According to the reflexive understanding of the biased and incomplete character of all accounts (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 8), truths are also constructions. Meijer (2007, p. 110) highlighted that the truth has not become superfluous, but living in a multicultural society has taught (young) people that the truth cannot be produced along a single view or standpoint. The media literacy aspect gives information about the audiences' abilities to interpret and question crime-related information they obtain from different sources. Our second research question is therefore:

RQ2: How is crime media literacy connected to perceptions of violence and crime?

Our third assumption is that people are capable of reflecting on how crime information exposure affects their fear of crime. We believe these reflections can illuminate how people interpret crime-related information and how they experience its effects. It is a common subject of critical discourse that there is too much violence in the media. Most people nevertheless believe that violence in the media has an effect on other people but not on themselves (Potter, 2014, p.

386). Quantitative research on crime news exposure and fear of crime has suggested that the two are correlated (Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006), but the temporal and causal order between the two remains an open question. United States-based research has suggested that concern for crime can be more closely related to crime news exposure than to real trends and patterns of crime (Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003; see also Intravia et al., 2017). According to Altheide (2011, pp. 260–262), fear is the most commonly used emotion in the media because it is an effective means of generating an emotional reaction in an audience. People can be taught to be afraid of something (Altheide, 2002, p. 6), and even news about fear of crime can have an impact on how contemporary media audiences structure their experience of violence (Heber, 2011).

The cultivation of fear—a belief that the world is violent and that becoming a victim is a real threat—is said to be a long-term emotional effect of exposure to media violence. On the other hand, the abundance of violent media content is said to build tolerance in audiences. When the tolerance increases, those things that used to horrify or upset us no longer do so (Potter, 2014, p. 387–389). However, the effects of crime news coverage on individuals are embedded in a variety of contexts. The type of media content, the recipient’s personality, and the recipient’s previous experience of violence are essential conditional factors. Previous research has also suggested that news is interpreted in a way that supports one’s existing habits of thinking (see Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 226). The correlation between fear and news exposure is likely to be a complex causal process where self-selection and genuine learning-based causation are closely interconnected (Kivivuori et al., 2002, p. 16). Utilising our qualitative focus group approach, we try to make explicit how people themselves experience the effects of crime- and violence-related information and its relationship to their fear of crime. Thus, our third research question is:

RQ3: How do media users evaluate the connection between crime information exposure and fear of crime?

Focus Groups and Thematic Questions

Empirically, this study draws upon the findings of a qualitative study of four focus group interviews. A focus group interview is a discussion situation where participants comment in a reasonably spontaneous fashion and collectively compare their observations of the phenomenon being discussed. Hence, group discussions provide diverse information on the issue being studied. Compared to the quantitative survey method, focus groups give more refined and contextual information about an issue. However, these findings cannot be generalised to larger populations. Here, we chose this method to gain information that can complement results from existing quantitative research about the interplay of people's media practices and their perceptions of violence and crime.

We selected the groups with two ideas in mind. First, we wanted the groups to represent different kinds of people in terms of gender and age. Second, we tried to compose each group so that the attendees knew each other beforehand. The purpose of this approach was to more easily facilitate discussions from the outset and make the atmosphere more comfortable. With regard to the first idea, we aimed to reveal more diverse views than a more homogeneous selection of groups would have offered. Previous research has supported the assumption that a more divergent selection of groups brings out more divergent views. For example, age and employment status affect how we experience insecurity (e.g. Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006). In addition, women and men tend to have very different levels of fear and different experiences of violence.

Consequently, single-gender groups may be more comfortable talking to each other (Hollander,

2004). We had one men-only group, one women-only group, and two mixed groups. The single-gender groups were anticipated to be more like-minded, while the mixed groups were expected to reveal contradictions and variance in their evaluations.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

We based our selection of groups on existing social networks to help group members engage freely in the discussion. The participants of the first group, one woman and two men, were all middle-aged (aged 37–58). They were linked by their work or hobby (harness racing). The second group was leisure-based. Its members were middle-aged and elderly women (aged 51–84) who attended the same craft club. The third group consisted of university students, both women and men (aged 23–29). The fourth group consisted of young men (aged 24–30) who worked in the Finnish Defence Forces. Four focus groups are considered sufficient for a simple research question (Rabiee, 2004) or where the overall population size is low (Fallon & Brown, 2002).

The group interviews were semistructured. The interview guide was organised around three themes. The aim of the first theme was to introduce the topic and to generate perceptions of violence in Finnish society. The second theme concerned the attendees' own experiences of violence and estimates of their risk of becoming victims of violence. The aim of the third theme was to prompt the participants to evaluate different information sources relating to violence and crime, while also gathering information on their media use practices. In this article, our focus is on the third theme. Nevertheless, there were also references to information sources and media within the first two themes, which are especially valuable because of their spontaneity.

Before discussing the themes, the moderator went over the basic rules for discussion, such as a permission to express disagreement, comment on each other's responses, and ask each other questions. At the beginning of the focus group sessions, the attendees completed a questionnaire, which—in addition to some demographic questions—asked how often the respondent used the different media that were listed. The list consisted of the most important traditional news media and their online sites. The most popular social media sites were listed as well. The respondents could also add other sources to the list.

Relevance of Different Sources of Crime Information

To examine the relevance of different sources of information about violence and crime, we analysed what kinds of meanings and values the interviewees gave to different information sources in their media repertoires and what made each source relevant to them (cross-media aspect, RQ1). The following sources of information were found: 1) personal experiences of violence and the experiences of a familiar person, 2) social media as a news source, 3) journalistic media, 4) 'alternative' media, and 5) information produced by the authorities.

Personal experiences of violence were seldom mentioned during the interviews; this may be at least partly due to the group-interview situation. Instead, some secondary experiences were mentioned. For example, an elderly woman spoke of a friend who had been violently robbed in the middle of the day. She concluded that such attacks have become more common recently. Another elderly woman recounted how a familiar person had been killed with a knife, and even though she did not see the situation, it had caused her to have a fear of knives for a long time. These examples illustrate how vicarious victimization may be linked to experienced insecurity (Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006, p. 218).

Information also spreads in face-to-face interaction through interpersonal ties. According to our interviewees, it is common to ask a friend about local incidents, particularly in small localities. The interviewees also considered the information obtained through personal social networks and the ‘grapevine’ to be quite reliable.

For the young and the middle aged, social media seemed to be an important source of crime-related information. Facebook and Twitter were mentioned often. It became apparent that people are more likely to believe information if the messenger is familiar. This illustrates how social aspects contribute to the worthwhileness of different media. Closed WhatsApp groups and closed Facebook groups whose members know each other (at least on some level) were evaluated as more reliable than anonymous discussion boards. Local Facebook groups were also mentioned as sources of certain inside information.

Many times, for example, if [I] saw several police cars somewhere, I could quite quickly track down from there [local FB group] information on what had happened.... That a neighbour had taken a baseball bat in hand [and brawled]. (Defence forces, male)

Information can spread effectively through interpersonal ties because people in such networks are regularly exposed to repetitive messaging (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). However, even then, information does not ‘infect’ individuals and spread between people like viruses. First, people are much more suspicious of social media campaigns than previously believed (Hodas & Lerman, 2014). Second, a user may be so overloaded with information that a message may remain unnoticed without some special signal—for example, a signal about its popularity (Lerman, 2016). Individuals may also actively rebuff content if the source is considered repellent or unreliable. In that case, they do not pay attention to the content or share it. In the interviews,

MV-lehti (a Finnish alternative or ‘fake’ online media source) was mentioned as an example of such a source.

The news media continue to be an essential source of crime-related information. The interviewees also evaluated the news media as relatively reliable. This is in line with recent studies that attest to the Finns’ high level of trust in the news and in the media (European Commission, 2017, p. 15; Newman et al., 2018). The interviewees valued so-called quality media because they believed that it does not exaggerate or distort information, at least not intentionally. They mentioned the Finnish public broadcasting company, YLE, as an example of such media and as an important source of crime-related information. One reason for trusting YLE was that it does not need to make a profit.

The crime-related information gained from evening tabloids was considered important and even reasonably reliable even though the interviewees found it somewhat sensationalist. This supports Meijer’s (2007, p. 106) argument that contempt for light entertainment does not keep people from consuming it. However, the Finnish news media were regarded as only one source of information among others, and their shortcomings and blinkered view were noted. Instant and reliable information or alternative perspectives and interpretations were also sought from foreign news media. The foreign news media was considered valuable, especially in connection with important world events such as terrorist attacks.

The so-called alternative media, which are not committed to the guidelines for journalists, were used as a complementary source of information on crime. Some participants thought that alternative or fake media—even though they are often unreliable and have poorly written content—could provide useful information that is not on the mainstream media’s agenda or does not represent the mainstream media’s viewpoints. While the journalistic media are still verifying

the facts or seeking confirmation of the event, the alternative media can readily report on the events from their own ideological point of view.

M1: I check MV-lehti weekly, what they have, and then decide, if I look further ...

M2: Badly written, and that terrible provocation; I am tired of reading these.

M1: But there are often stories that appear only later [in the other outlets].

M2: Right.

M1: But the text is really ... it spoils itself, that whole thing.

Interviewer: But you still feel that you could get some information there?

M1: Yes, but one has to be very critical and try to find confirmation from somewhere.

(Defence forces, males)

The police and other authorities are also active on social media. The interviewees who use Twitter said that they check the police's Twitter account when they hear about a criminal incident. The information produced by authorities enables a quick look at whether there is a risk to oneself or one's family and if one should obtain more information.

The interviews demonstrate the importance of news media as an information source about violence and crime. However, other sources are also relevant. Social media is widely used, and some use the so-called alternative media to complement the offerings of the established news media. Indications of violence can also lead to sources of information that one does not normally use, which exemplifies how media use is embedded in different situations in everyday life.

The Media Literacy Perspective: Trust in Media Crime Coverage

Analysis of crime media literacy and its connection to notions of violence (RQ2) revealed that the focus group participants generally trusted in their ability to evaluate different forms of media content. They recognised certain problems concerning crime news coverage. However, there were some differences between the focus groups. The group comprising an older generation of women was not as confident in their media literacy as the other groups were. The criticisms presented in the groups focused largely on three themes: 1) the sensationalism and tabloidization of news stemming from commercial motives, 2) the accelerated pace of online news output, and 3) ethical considerations regarding what information should and should not be published.

Journalism assesses crime news based on its own criteria, and the attention given to crimes does not follow the patterns and trends of criminal behaviours (Estrada, 1999; Kivivuori, Kemppi, & Smolej, 2002; Syrjälä, 2007). Many of the interviewees recognised this discrepancy. For example, they supposed that there is more domestic violence than what is reported in the news. They also noticed that terrible cases are more likely to receive media attention than more common cases, and that sometimes interesting details get disproportionate attention in the news media.

The elderly women did not have a clear picture of the news criteria, and they were more uncertain about whether the crime news coverage provided an accurate picture of the real world. Some of them said that the media may have created an impression that violence has increased and become more brutal over time. They also talked about how some things, such as sexual assaults, were brushed under the carpet in the past but were now discussed more openly.

The interviewees shared their expectation that commercial entertainment and sensationalism may impair the perceived quality and factuality of a news story (Pantti, 2011, p. 211). In spite of this criticism, they did not regard Finnish crime journalism as particularly cruel. They also considered Finnish crime journalism to be quite prudent when publishing names or

pictures of suspects. These findings have also been confirmed in previous research (Smolej, 2011).

The focus group discussions support the notion of the importance of the media use context. What is considered informative in one situation can be viewed as uninformative in another situation. For instance, even if reporting about a fistfight would generally be considered unnecessary, it could be considered relevant if the incident had occurred in one's own neighbourhood.

As value is given to instantaneity on the web, it is harder to carry out the proper verification processes usually required of professional journalists. The interviewees recognised the resulting uncertainty of information and took it into account. The possibility of errors due to the accelerated pace of online news output increased the interviewees' reservations about the information provided by news media. The participants also criticised news media for publishing follow-up stories even when there was really no longer any news.

The mission of the media is to inform citizens of important issues, but for ethical reasons, journalists conceal specific types of information when reporting on crimes. In the quantitative part of our research project, 31% of the Finnish adult population agreed that the traditional news media 'protect certain violent groups', and 18% shared the opinion that the traditional news media knowingly downplay the real quantity of violence in Finnish society. These notions were particularly prevalent among persons who used alternative media sources on crime (Näsi, Tanskanen, Haara, Reunanen, & Kivivuori, 2018).² Thus, distrust of traditional news media is fairly prevalent in the population and correlated with distinct media use patterns. In the current qualitative analysis, the interviewees did not always agree on the limits of information disclosure in the media. For example, sexual offenders aroused anger in elderly women, and they wanted to induce collective shame in the context of reporting on such crimes. They stated that the news

media are too cautious in publishing the suspect's name and image and that the privacy of criminals is overprotected. In contrast, the students stressed that to a certain extent, media should protect persons charged with a criminal offence because disclosing the suspect's identity might also disclose the victim's identity. The students also considered whether it is always relevant to report the offender's name; they did not endorse the idea of 'collective revenge'.

Here [in Finland], they [criminals] are protected. If a criminal is shown at a trial [in a news photo], then he has a towel or something on his head, and no one knows who he is. Overseas, trials are broadcast live and the face [of the criminal] is shown. They are not allowed to cover themselves up. Maybe they should be punished more in a way that shows that this person is a criminal. (Craft club, female)

In principle, you have to protect the perpetrator until he is found accountable.... It has to be verified before you report it.... I don't care to know the name if there is a bigger episode going on. (University students, female)

Differences in the ways of assessing the limit of concealment were apparent when discussing the crimes committed by immigrants. Some interviewees suspected that the legacy media do not cover these issues properly. By comparing different information sources, they were left with the impression that the news media do not report everything. However, the student group did not blame the news media for concealing information. On the contrary, they said that the media have been eager to raise the issue of asylum seekers' crimes, have discussed asylum seekers in the context of security, and have thus stigmatised entire groups of people as a threat. They criticised the journalistic media for this polarizing method of reporting and stressed that

word choice may matter. Nonetheless, they also noticed that Finnish journalists have recently begun paying attention to their method of reporting.

The different ways of discussing the news coverage of crimes committed by immigrants show that news is interpreted through personal frames. Webster (2014, p. 111) has stated how American conservatives, when exposed to the content of mainstream media, do not consume it as such, but instead interpret the media through frameworks where the media appear to be liberal and guilty of applying double standards (see also Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012). The same attitude towards news media and their allegedly subjective stance was especially evident among the younger interviewees. In the group recruited from the military, the participants talked about the ‘tone of the newspapers’ or the ‘Western view on the issue’. In the group of students, the participants did not consider journalists as able to construct completely value-free stories. The news was always viewed as someone’s subjective writing.

If I find some incident [such as a terrorist attack] of great interest and I want to know what really happened and who is guilty of what, then I might look at Reuters or the Russian media to get some other perspectives on the matter. (Defence forces, male)

You have to remember that every time something is published, it is someone’s subjective writing. There are some things you can verify and some things that are experiences. (University students, male)

A reflective approach to all available information may be a sign of good media literacy. However, this critical perspective can slide into generalised cynicism and a distrust of everything and everyone, which is a stance that unites conspiracy theorists (Buckingham, 2017). Andrejevic

(2013, p. 3) pointed out how the vast network of different sources, each challenging the previous one, encourages a state of constant doubt. Constant mistrust and doubt can become an instrumental attitude that helps an individual to cope with an endless stream of content and information. Our interviews partially support this notion of constant doubt as a default attitude. Younger participants in particular expressed strong critical views of both traditional journalism and alternative media. Instead of absorbing material uncritically, they were confident in their own ability to determine the veracity of the content using their personal competence or intuition (see also Noppari & Hiltunen, 2017).

The Relationship between Media and Experiences of Violence and Fear

We wanted to explore how media consumers think about the consequences of crime news with regard to their fear of crime (RQ3). The focus group participants evaluated the crime news coverage as abundant and exaggerated, which may also reflect the common critical discourse that there is too much violence in the media (Potter, 2014, p. 383). Crime-related news coverage was believed to increase some people's fear of crime. This finding was corroborated independently in each of the four focus groups, a notable consistency given that the four focus groups were recruited from such different backgrounds. Thus, according to the lay perception, the link between crime news exposure and fear of crime is causal, with news generating fear.

Most people say that violence in the media has an effect on other people but not on them (Potter, 2014, p. 386; Åkerström, 1998); this also applied to our interviewees. However, the conversations about crime journalism and its effects were strongly influenced by the age of the interviewee. The elderly in particular talked about anxiety caused by the flood of crime-related

information. Anxiety triggered by the criminal news coverage stemmed from a substantial amount of violence-related information.

Sometimes I let myself off the distress of violence, so I do not open the Internet or anything. I take a one-day break from all the information. (Craft club, female)

Even the participants in the group comprised of interviewees of an older generation did not respond the same way to information about crime. Some of them rationalised the risk of violence to themselves more than the others and described how the prominence of violence in the media does not necessarily mean that crime and violence has increased in their neighbourhood. By relying on one's own experience to overrule media imagery, one is able to maintain a low level of worry (see Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, & Bannister, 2010, p. 453). On the other hand, some of the elderly women expressed a belief that the world is violent and they worried about how children in particular can cope with 'a raw world'. For high worriers, it is irrelevant where things happen, whereas medium worriers and low worriers are not so concerned if something occurs elsewhere (Ditton et al., 2010, p. 454). The male interviewee cited below is a good example of a low worrier:

Interviewer: Does this [piece of news about a mugging] increase your insecurity?

M: No. I have never been afraid. It [his home region] has always been a safe place. Nothing terrible has ever happened out there. (Harness racing, male)

The younger participants, especially the men, said that the crime news coverage does not cause them anxiety. This may be due to differences in how women and men speak and put their

experiences into words, or how men present their identities (Burcar & Åkerström, 2009). A focus group interview as a research method may also lead to social desirability pressures that induce participants to either deny or share experiences of fear and distress. On the other hand, the differences in how men and women talk about threats became apparent in the mixed groups as well.

An interesting finding was that the conversation turned easily from the threat of violence to media criticism. Younger participants were irritated by the way the news media exaggerate, dramatise, and frame news of crime. The exaggerated news of crime was even considered an extension of terrorism, as both abuse people's fear.

With regard to the effect of media content on tolerance of violence (Potter, 2014), some of the interviewees said that they would never become accustomed to violence. However, they admitted that 'ordinary' terrorist acts outside Europe may have already become such commonplace news that it no longer interests them much—an effect which is similar to becoming accustomed to violence.

The use of media is in many ways social. News stories are discussed face to face and commented on in social media. Interpretations are built on these networks of interaction. An interesting question is whether these networks are capable of reinforcing and exaggerating threats or calming worries and putting them into perspective. A participant in one of our focus groups shared an example of this calming of worries:

I went to a school next to a hospital for the criminally insane.... There was lots of news everywhere that someone had again escaped. Elsewhere, it provoked panic. But the nurses had explained to us that these prisoners need to get out for a walk.... When you are used to thinking that they are humans like the rest of us, when the escape of a triple murderer

was all over the news, we played at the school yard just like on any other day. (University students, female)

The participant describes how social reactions calmed her fears while news in the media and rumours circulating in social networks provoked panic elsewhere.³ Thus, this example suggests that social networks are capable of reinforcing threats provoked in the media as well as calming them; both options are possible and real.

Conclusion

Due to the rapid change of the media environment in the context of emerging new threat perceptions, there is a need to revisit the interplay of crime information sources and people's experiences of violence. When the media environment and people's media use patterns become more complex, it becomes more difficult to capture media use solely through quantitative surveys. The aim of this article was to combine media research and criminology perspectives to study qualitatively how people construct their perceptions of violence and crime and how this is connected to their media use and their other information sources. Drawing on focus group interviews involving 24 persons, several relevant mechanisms in crime-related media use/reception were observed. Our interviewees creatively contrasted sources of crime news, mixing traditional and new media with direct personal observations. Increasing options to compare sources of crime news may feed a new kind of distrust of media representations, with some groups suspecting 'cover-ups' and others seeing the unnecessary criminalization of specific social groups. The interviewees were also fairly unanimous in seeing crime news media as fear-

inducing. Since we included a group of older participants, we witnessed possible generational differences in media literacy and reception.

Main findings

Media exposure and fear. Our research shows a substantial variation in how people obtain crime-related information and how they negotiate their impressions of violence and threats. In line with previous survey-based research, gender and age both seem to interact with the reception and use of crime information. In our focus groups, the elderly women shared how the crime-related content of evening tabloids and television had increased their fear of violence and how the media made the violence tangible. They tried to limit this effect by restricting their media use. This may be linked to the finding of recent audience research that showed that older people feel anxiety about the great amount of media content. In contrast, for the younger generation the large number of media titles and the fragmentation of personal media use seems to be a normal feature of everyday media life (Tammi, 2016, p. 137). However, not all of the elderly women considered information on violence and crime in the same way. Some of them related the received information to their own experiences, to history, and to the situation in other parts of the world. Hence, it should not be assumed that the relationship between age and media effects is homogeneous. The younger participants were more irritated because of the media itself rather than being anxious about the violence it presented. For example, they accused the media of using clickbait or of stirring up fear.

The significance of people's social and cultural context (or personal frame) in the reception of news was apparent in how differently the interviewees judged the news coverage of crimes committed by immigrants. In the group recruited from the military, the young men

supposed that the media conceal crimes committed by immigrants. In contrast, in the group of students the prevailing opinion was that the media have eagerly highlighted crimes committed by immigrants and talked about immigrants using the frames of security and threats.

From the criminological perspective, our findings suggest that in the future, the cross-mediated nature of crime information exposure should be integrated into criminological research on the fear of crime. More qualitative research in more socially variable subpopulations is needed (see also Boda & Szabó, 2011). The socially embedded and constantly critically cross-validated reception of crime news is a challenge that also needs to be tackled in quantitative survey-based research on the fear of crime. The role of previous ideological notions suggests that the study of the media-crime nexus would benefit from factoring in people's political worldviews, at least in the liberal-conservative continuum.

Cross-mediated crime media use. Our analysis demonstrates that the interviewees routinely use many kinds of media and information sources. The traditional media (printed newspapers, television, and radio) and personal contacts still play a remarkable role as sources of crime-related information, and online media are important as well. This is in line with recent studies that attest to the Finns' high level of trust in the news and in the media. We observed how, consistent with the cross-media hypothesis, media exposure was an interrelated web of sources crossing the thresholds between traditional and social media, even including local rumours. Hence, the reception of crime news is thoroughly based on cross-media linkages and critical lay views based on 'cross-validation' against the backdrop of local and direct knowledge.

In line with this, our study suggests that the use of a crime information source cannot be equated with 'respect' for it. A particular medium can provide new perspectives and supplementary knowledge to one's news diet, despite one's contempt for it. The medium may also play a role as a rapid source of information even though the information obtained is not

considered good or proper. For example, the tabloids are used as sources of instant facts, but further information is often searched for elsewhere. Similarly, from the so-called alternative media, one can find information that is only published later in the journalistic media.

Our study illustrates how people are exposed to and use crime information in various ways. Some people may follow violence-related content routinely; others may actively search for it if an act of violence happens. In addition to self-selection, people also run into violence-related information without actively searching for it. For example, this happens when people are routinely monitoring news. Passive exposure may also occur when one's friend shares on Facebook a piece of news about violence. This illustrates how social aspects also contribute to the worthwhileness of different media.

Crime media literacy. The research corroborated that people mostly rely on their own ability to discern what is true and what is false, while their trust in others' ability to do this was not as strong. However, in the group comprised of individuals from an older generation, trust in their own media literacy was not as strong as in other groups. This may be because their experience of media comes mostly from the print and television era, and they find the new digital and social media somewhat confusing.

Even when the interviewees trusted their media literacy in principle, they admitted that in practice, they are often too lazy to evaluate the reliability of online sources or cross-check information in their daily lives. In the age of instant access to information, people are used to quickly checking the headlines without reading the whole story. Therefore, the image of the event may rely strongly on a headline. Much of the exposure to media also takes place without people having a conscious awareness of it. This is especially the case when people are multitasking as a strategy for helping them keep up with a flood of information (Potter, 2014, pp. 11 and 48).

Multitasking reduces a person's ability to concentrate on a particular media message, and this

automaticity increases the risk that people accept unchallenged the meaning presented by the media.

The interviewees did acknowledge the possibility of mistakes in accelerated news output. They also considered how commercial motivations and news criteria influence the nature of the information released. The interviewees seemed to recognise different media genres. They all expected to see sensationalism when reading evening tabloids, whereas ‘serious’ newspapers were not expected to contain light entertainment. They also considered the so-called alternative or fake media to be unreliable and regarded its content as badly written, even if some of the interviewees viewed such media as useful sources of information that the legacy media do not publish (e.g. suspects’ names and photograph).

Limitations and Further Research

This study has some limitations. One such limitation is that focus groups provide an unnatural setting for group interactions. Group pressures should be taken into consideration. It is impossible to remove social desirability and self-presentation pressures, especially in the context of the sensitive theme of violence.

Focus groups cannot serve as a representative sample of the population, even though the composition of the groups is more or less diverse. Acknowledging this, we have attempted to illustrate qualitatively how people make sense of crime-related information and how they relate this information to their perceptions of violence. These limitations of qualitative research design highlight the possibility of supplementing the research setting with a representative survey. A survey can test if the findings are valid in populations or subpopulations. This will be the next step for our research project.

Fictional media were not included in the questionnaire, which was in line with our intentions. However, the perceptions of violence in fictional media is a question worth considering. According to Stehling et al. (2016, p. 327), the use of fictional media is mostly neglected in cross-media audience studies, despite the fact that ‘the use of fictional media content forms as much a part of our (media) lives as information-related content’. In our focus groups, additional types of entertainment media were discussed, such as crime-related reality television shows and literature.

New sources of information have imparted a critical spirit to discussions of the media’s reporting. There are signs of confusion concerning how people are to handle the abundance of information available from different sources and how to evaluate its reliability. There is a need for research that explores how information circulates in people’s social networks and how it affects the assessment of information.

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Table 1. Focus groups of the study

Focus group	Men	Women	Total	Age	Duration
G1: Hobby/work, harness racing	2	1	3	37–58	100 min
G2: Leisure based, craft club	0	11	11	51–84	112 min
G3: University students	2	3	5	23–29	108 min
G4: Work based, defence forces	5	0	5	24–30	65 min
<i>Total</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>23–84</i>	<i>385 min</i>

Notes

¹ This research is part of a larger project entitled ‘Views of Violence in a Changing Media Landscape’, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the sources from which people gather information on violence and how (or if) media use is associated with fear of crime and perceived societal risks.

² The survey data was based on the Finnish National Crime Survey (FNCS-2017), which was collected in the Fall of 2017. The original sample size was 14,000 and the final number of respondents was 6141 (response rate 43.9%). The participants were aged between 15 and 74 years old. The respondents were selected through random sampling from the Population Information System of Finland.

³ There are studies that question the concept of moral panic, which states that a special focus on violent crimes could increase people’s fear of being a victim oneself. For example, Åkerström (1998) states that so-called moral panics inform us about other people’s attitudes, emotions and behavior. These evaluations are in accordance with the clues one receives in conversation and with what is reflected in the general discussion at the time. Accordingly, the current climate of opinion could convince people that others are afraid—but not me.